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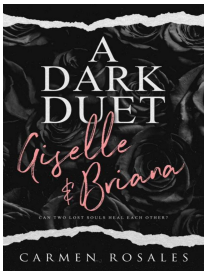

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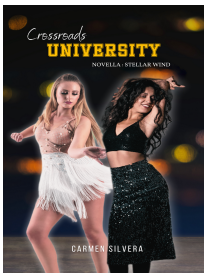

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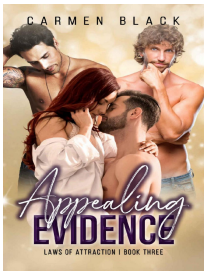

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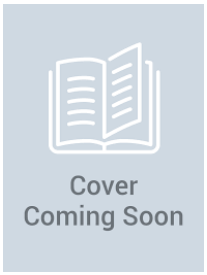

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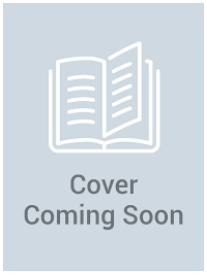

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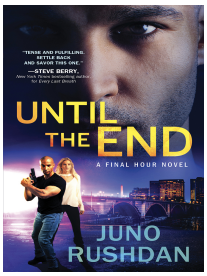

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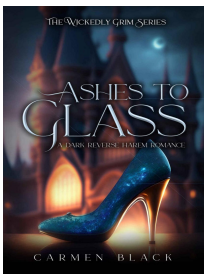

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UNTIL
US
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR FIRST LOVE
BECOMES YOUR SECOND?
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Dark Romance

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Sugar Coated Secrets

Like A Moth To A Flame

Giselle

Author's Note

I want to thank all the constant readers for purchasing my book and taking a chance on me. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be able to keep writing and sharing my stories.

This is not as dark as my usual books, but I wanted to share Aura's story. It had some very dark moments. Death is dark, and when it happens to someone you love, it's one of the darkest moments of your life. I think Aura's loss was just as dark as any dark romance you might have read.

It was previously published as a duet Until Her and Until Now. I felt Aura's story needed a few touches. I didn't feel like I was done. To be honest, I think a book can evolve just like our lives. It can change. It can be better.

Aura's story became Until Us because it wasn't only about her. It was about everyone that was part of her journey. The people she loved and lost, but ultimately, she found happiness. In her heart, they live on forever.

Thank you, reader, for being part of my journey.

—Carmen Rosales

“Love isn’t soft, like those poets say. Love has teeth which bite and the wounds never close.”
— Stephen King, *The Body*

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About the Author

1

Aura

I'm sitting in the back of a black Rolls-Royce as the driver pulls through a gate that leads to a sprawling mansion. My jaw almost hits the floor. I have never seen a house up close so big before. These people are insanely rich. The lawns are manicured and have hedges made into figures. The house looks like a celebrity mansion with acres of secluded real estate.

This is nothing compared to how I was raised. My parents lived on the other side of town, where the working-class people live.

The driver opens the back passenger door and gets my three suitcases out of the trunk. It's everything I own—basically the clothes on my back.

My parents were out for a night on the town when they were sideswiped by a semi-truck and died instantly. Thinking about them brings a sting to the back of my eyes. Since my parents had loans on practically everything they owned, the bank sold the house, and all that was left was paid to creditors. I was left with nothing at seventeen. No money, no house, and no place to live.

My mother's neighbor heard of an opening for a housekeeper nearby where she worked on this side of town. When the family learned of my situation, they spoke to the social worker, and rather than being sent to foster care, the judge granted them temporary custody for four months until I turned eighteen. The stipulation is that I work the maximum number of hours a seventeen-year-old can work after school, and they'll provide room and board to include paid tuition to Spencer Academy for my senior year.

The double doors open, and a butler greets me.

"You must be Aura."

I give him a nervous smile. "Yes."

"I will have your belongings brought to the maid's quarters so you can get settled in."

The loss of my parents devastated me. I went to therapy and grieved for two months until the doctors were sure I was mentally stable. My friends back home promised they would be there when I returned, but I was closed off. Marcus promised he would call me and assured me our relationship wasn't over, but that has faded too.

"Thank you."

"Mrs. St. Claire will be down in a minute to give you a tour and tell you her expectations while you are here."

As I nod, I hear the click-clacking of heels on the pristine cream marble floors.

"There she is."

A woman in her late forties with an elegant chignon approaches, making my shift dress paired with my Converse feel out of place.

"Hello, Mrs. St. Claire. My name is Aura."

"Yes, yes, I know, dear. Miss Locke, your neighbor, told me so much about you. I trust her judgment, and she only said great things. I met with the social worker, and she assured me that everything had gone smoothly with the paperwork. I have taken the liberty to enroll you at Spencer Academy. Mr. St. Claire donates a hefty sum to the school every year so the principal was considerate enough to grant us an exception to have you enrolled." She looks down at my worn sneakers, and I can tell by her expression she doesn't approve. She tries to play it off when I catch her scrutiny by giving me a dry smile. "I hope the trip over was easy."

"Oh yes, ma'am. Everything was perfect. I had no issues on the drive over."

"Please call me Diana. Ma'am makes me feel so… so old."

"Okay, Diana."

Looking at her closely, I notice her perfect bone structure and flawless complexion, which could only come from Botox and a good dermatologist.

She leads me toward a staircase to the second floor. Once we reach the landing from the marble staircase that leads to a hallway, there is a room next to the laundry room. She opens the door, and at the foot of the full-size bed are my three suitcases.

"This is your room. The rest of the house staff stay in the downstairs wing. I put you in this room next to the laundry room for convenience and the fact that you're younger. After school, I will need you to work for four hours cleaning the second floor and laundry. When you graduate, the head housekeeper, Miss Jean, will give you a detailed schedule. For now, I just need the second floor, including Kalum's room, cleaned, and when his friends are over, you'll tidy the mess they make. Miss Jean has had it with their messes."

She points at a wall-to-wall closet with four school uniforms hanging neatly pressed. "These are the school uniforms we picked up from the cleaners. The dry cleaner comes for pickup every Thursday before you head to school, and delivery is every Saturday in the afternoon. Since there is no bus transportation, you will ride with Kalum to and from school."

Camila told me the St. Claires had a son the same age as me. She said that Mr. St. Claire was an equity investor tycoon and that I was in good hands.

The St. Claires would also give me a weekly two-hundred-dollar allowance as a perk for agreeing to stay with them and take the job after graduation.

When Mrs. St. Claire leaves the room, I sit on the bed and look around. It's more luxurious than any room I've ever had. The room has a mini-fridge and flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. Everything is nice and fancy, but it isn't home, and my parents are not here. My mother was a loan officer, and my father worked as an assistant manager at a lumber store. My parents met in college, and my mother fell pregnant. She finished school, but my father had to drop out and get a job to support us.

It was rough sometimes because they lived paycheck to paycheck and could only afford the necessities. I went to public school my whole life, but my parents' love made up for my lack of luxury at home. I couldn't have asked for better parents. I take in my surroundings with a heavy heart. No more home-cooked meals or nightly talks with Mom and Dad on the front porch. They are gone, and now it's just me.

2

Aura

I head downstairs dressed in the school uniform and light makeup to make a good first impression. I'm in the kitchen looking inside the massive fridge stocked like a grocery store and decide on yogurt for breakfast. When I close the door of the fridge, I jolt.

"You scared me!"

Gray eyes belonging to the most beautiful face I have ever seen are attached to the body leaning against the granite counter. He tilts his head, raking his eyes over me in my uniform.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Well, there goes first impressions. I notice he is wearing the same colors as my uniform with a Spencer Academy logo on his blazer. This must be Kalum.

My gaze follows his tailored jacket—the guy is massive. He has broad shoulders with straight brown hair you want to sink your fingers into. The only thing that makes him a turnoff is his scowl as he looks at me with disgust.

Standing to his full height, he easily towers over me. He must be like six foot three to my five foot one. When he crosses his arms, the jacket stretches at the seams.

"I asked you a question."

I snap myself out of it and hope he doesn't think I was ogling him. Well, I kind of was. Marcus is five-eleven and lean. This guy is muscular and huge.

"I-I'm sorry. My name is Aura, and you must be Kalum. I'm supposed to ride with you to school." I wince when he raises his eyebrows. "I'm the new housekeeper."

I open the yogurt, then grab the spoon to dip it, and bring it to my mouth. I swallow, feeling the cool creamy sensation down my throat that feels like heaven.

"I don't care for my mother's charity projects, and let's get one thing straight. I'm not taking you with me to school."

My eyes widen at the harshness of his tone. Why is he such an ass? How am I supposed to get there on time or there at all? My appetite quickly vanishes, and I toss the half-eaten yogurt in the trash and quickly wash my spoon.

"Your mother told me you would give me a ride to school every day."

He raises his fingers and pinches his nose. "Maybe you'll understand this way. I. Do. Not. Give. A. Fuck. I'm not giving you a ride to school, ever."

I place my hands on my hips. "Why not?"

"I don't want to be seen with you."

"You don't even know me."

He claps his hands together sarcastically. "Exactly. I don't know you, and I don't want to know you. When you see me, don't look at me, don't talk to me. To me, you are just like everyone who cleans this house. The hired help. It doesn't include free rides to school. Figure that shit out on your own."

This guy may be good-looking, but he's an asshole.

"You know what? Forget it." I grab my backpack and head out the front door.

I walk down the long driveway and pull up the map on my phone. Great, three miles. I blow a puff of air out of my mouth and take a deep breath and start walking. After walking for ten minutes, I feel the ground trembling under my feet and hear a roar of an engine. I look over my shoulder to the sound coming from down the road and see a matte-black sports car zoom by me.

I give a loud shriek and run toward the grass on the side of the road as the wind blows my skirt up, but I catch it in time, making sure I don't flash anyone. When I look up for a brief second, I can see the red taillights. I make out the license plate, and it reads KALUM.

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What a rude, rich prick. What is his deal?

After the three-mile hike on the road passing huge, gated estates, I see an imposing gate with the Spencer Academy crest on it. The school looks like an old church they made into a private school. Whatever it is, it screams wealth and high-privileged snobs. This is nothing compared to Spencer Public High School.

I'm sweaty and hot. My hair sticks to the back of my neck, and I pull the long tresses and smell. I love for my hair to smell like shampoo or body spray, but right now, it smells like outside. If I have to walk every morning to school, I'll have to figure something out. There is no bus, and I cannot afford an Uber every day. I will have to make some extra money for rainy and snowy days when walking is not an option.

When I pass the gate, I scan the student parking lot. There are rows of expensive cars normal teenagers do not drive. These people are insanely rich, but I will have a tough senior year if they are all like Kalum.

I walk into the admission office and retrieve my schedule and locker number. People walk by me, giving me curious stares. Most likely because they've never seen me before.

After closing my locker with the click of the lock, I see a girl with short black hair and expressive dark eyes smiling at me. I look nervously behind me to see if she is smiling at me or someone behind me. When I turn back around, she gives me a smirk.

"Hi, I'm Exie, and you must be Aura."

Confused, I pinch my brows together. "How do you know my name?"

"That's easy, silly. Kalum already let everyone know that you are the hired help in his house. The new housekeeper and his mom's new pet project."

I flinch at how cruel Kalum is by telling everyone my business. Now everyone will know I'm the charity case on top of being the new girl.

Her eyes soften. "It's okay. He's a dick to everyone. Well, except the bitch crew."

"Who's the—"

Three girls wearing their uniform skirts shorter than customary, paired with thigh-high stockings and heels, walk down the hallway in unison. Girls look with envy, and guys turn around to check them out. Two brunettes flank the blonde in the middle.

"Wait," the blonde demands, and the other two stop and turn around with raised eyebrows. The blonde looks at me from head to toe. "Yep, that's her. The maid Kalum told me about staying at his house."

I cross my hands over my chest and remember that the shirt is too snug on my breasts. Thanks to my mother, I have medium-size breasts and a plump backside that makes it difficult finding clothes that properly fit, leaving three inches of room on my waist. It wouldn't be a problem if I wasn't short and petite everywhere else. I had to quickly pin and sew the sides with a sewing kit because the skirt fit funny when I tried it on. These girls don't have that problem. They just hike the skirt to make it shorter. I'm the opposite. I'm trying to make it longer so I don't flash my ass to the world.

"Don't get any ideas with Kalum, bitch. He's taken."

I snort and walk up to her. "You know, insecurity is a real turnoff."

The hallway becomes quiet as students stand and watch. I guess no one talks down to this prissy bitch.

She glares at me, and four guys looking like Greek gods walk down the hallway. My eyes are trained on a particular one. Kalum sidles up to the blond prissy skank, and I watch as he slides his hand around her waist. She leans into him with familiarity. Come to think of it, it looks like a match made in heaven.

"What's up, baby?" he says in a sultry voice.

He turns to me and gives me a sarcastic smirk. "How was your walk?"

Before I can answer, wanting nothing more than to wipe that smug grin off his face, the blonde speaks up.

"I was just warning your maid here when it comes to you." She purses her lips as she looks up. "You know how these common skanks hired to work get ideas."

Rolling my eyes, I avert my gaze, and it lands on honey-brown eyes. It's one of his friends standing to his left. His eyes soften, and then he looks at Kalum and who I'm assuming is Kalum's girlfriend with the way she took her claws out, ready to attack. I can't decipher his expression, but it looks to me like annoyance.

The other three eye me with amusement.

One of them is brave enough and says, "Hey, I'm Jimmy. Aura, right?"

I nod. "Yeah."

When the bell rings, signaling the start of first period, everyone walks away like a bunch of ants on an ant farm. Once I find my assigned English class, I find an empty seat.

I notice the people who go here all act like Kalum. Rich snobs who haven't had a hard day in their lives. I take out the string I have been braiding, place my book on top to hold it in place, and begin braiding the strings together to make a friendship bracelet.

When I was twelve, my mother taught me how to make them. When I started high school, I kept growing out of my clothes, and things were expensive. She showed me how to braid the different colors and make different lengths with letters inside the

bracelets to sell at school. Then I opened an Etsy account and began to take custom orders and turn a profit. It wasn't much at first, but now I'm making a little bit of money. That was when I didn't have to worry about being on my own so soon with no support. There is no mom or dad to give me more life lessons or guidance. I bite down on my lower lip to keep it from trembling. From the grief that consumes me when I think about them being gone so soon.

I begin braiding when I feel eyes boring into me. When I turn my head, intense gray eyes narrow. The hairs on the back of my neck stand in awareness. Kalum stares at me from across the room, and I would give anything to know what is on his mind. Our gazes connect, but I keep threading. The teacher doesn't even notice. Mr. Krupp is busy writing notes on the smart board. When he finishes, I pull out my phone and snap a picture when he isn't looking.

It's the best way to take notes. Why write everything down in a rush when all you have to do is snap a picture and have all the notes saved instantly.

It's lunchtime, and I enter the cafeteria. It's fancy with tables and actual wood chairs instead of the custom picnic tables you see in public high school. Thinking about my old school, I miss Gina and Marcus. I tried texting Marcus this morning, but he didn't answer.

At first, I was mad he didn't respond right away. My fear was that he would find someone else and forget about me. I accepted that he would, but I didn't think he would ghost me so soon. It stings, and I guess it hurts more because I have no one. I'm all alone, and even Gina will find new friends to hang out with. They will all move on.

Getting over feeling sorry for myself, I push all my doubts aside and scroll through my phone to my bank app and calculate how much I will need to save for an Uber for rainy days, snow days, and lunch at school. I quickly figured out that I would have to bring a homemade lunch from now on to save enough.

My plan is to graduate and leave. I had no intention of staying on with the St. Claires as their housekeeper. I know I kind of led Mrs. St. Claire on by agreeing to this arrangement, but what choice did I have? *None at the moment*.

I get up from the empty table and make my way to the line to grab something to eat. I grab a small portion and calculate how much they charge for food. The guy with the soft-brown eyes the color of honey stands next to me while I contemplate buying the water or the iced tea. I quickly scan the area to find the price, and he slides his tray closer.

"Which one do you prefer?" he asks.

I chew on the corner of my lip. He probably would laugh because I need to buy the cheaper one. How do you tell a guy who lives in wealth you are worried about the price of a can of iced tea or a bottle of water?

"Take both," he says, grabbing them.

He places them on my tray. I look up, and his eyes soften, caressing my face.

"That's not necessary. I'll just take the water. I'm gonna need it to hydrate for my walk home," I tell him, placing the iced tea back.

He frowns. "Kalum didn't drive you?"

"Do you really need me to answer that? I'm the hired help and the maid. I don't get free rides to school."

"I'm Ca—"

I quickly walk away, knowing I'm being rude. He is friends with Kalum. Let him laugh it up with his friends. I don't care.

When I reach the register, the lady in a Spencer Academy staff uniform begins to ring me up.

"That'll be eleven dollars and seventy-five cents."

Jesus, that's about two hundred and thirty-five dollars a month if I eat the same thing every day. I reach for my wallet, my long hair sliding forward. A large arm towers over me and hands her a black credit card. My eyes widen, and my head tilts up when I see it's the guy with the brown eyes who I was so rude to earlier.

"Can you charge five hundred and put it on her account, please?"

My head snaps to the lunch lady as she places the card in the card reader.

"What is your name and student account number?"

"No. I-I can't take it."

He sighs behind me, handing her the iced tea. "If you could, please add this and swipe my card," he commands.

The lunch lady's eyes widen, and then she looks at me, giving me a grin.

"I can't pay you back."

"I don't want you to pay me back. It's no big deal."

"It's five hundred dollars," I deadpan.

He chuckles and shrugs. "So?"

Knowing I have no choice, I rattle off my information to the lunch lady.

He places the iced tea I wanted on my tray and grins.

"Like I was saying, my name is Cason."

“Nice to meet you. You didn’t have to do that. I’m sorry I was rude to you earlier. It’s just that not everyone has been very nice to me here.”

“I want to be the first. If you’ll let me?”

I bite my bottom lip nervously, standing by the empty table I was sitting at earlier.

His smile widens. Taking the time to get a good look at him, I notice he has straight teeth when he smiles and a nice face. He’s nice to look at and seems harmless. He is tall and fills out his uniform in all the right places, but I don’t trust him. I can’t trust anyone here.

“Yo, Cason.” We both turn to see one of his friends waving at him. “Stop slumming it with the help and come over here. We need to go over plays for our next game.”

I stiffen at his remark.

Cason shakes his head, clearly pissed off, giving him a hard glare. My eyes scan the rest of the table, and gray eyes find mine, sporting a scowl.

Rolling my eyes, I turn to Cason. “I don’t think this is a good idea. You should go.”

I plop myself on the chair, relieved when he walks away. Even if he paid to add money for lunch to my school account, I decide I’ll still bring my lunch. I’m sure at the end of the year they can reimburse the card he paid with, or I can give him the money if they give it back in a check.

The three girls dubbed the bitch crew enter the cafeteria like they own the place and sit near what I can now assume are the football jocks. The blonde all over Kalum in the hallway sits next to him, practically on his lap. I catch Cason’s gaze, but he looks away, acting like he is paying attention to his friends. I keep my eyes on my tray and begin to eat, but then something hits me, like tiny pebbles against my back.

I turn around and notice peanuts bouncing off me all over the floor. I look up and notice Jimmy and everyone laughing with their hands covering their mouths, trying not to attract attention from the cafeteria staff.

I take a deep breath. “These rich pricks are dumb and immature,” I mumble.

I notice Cason is looking at his friends with a frown, but he doesn’t stop them. My eyes find Kalum and watch him laughing along with the bitch crew giving him a glare.

Another peanut flies and lands in my hair. I slam the tray on the table, and it draws curious glances from the other students. They begin to laugh when they notice what is going on. I slide the peanuts out of my long hair. I move to empty my tray in the trash, needing to leave, not having touched my lunch.

I’m not one to throw away food usually, but students are not allowed to take the trays out of the cafeteria, so I’m fucked. I can’t stay here when it’s everyone against me, so I grab the water, my gaze trained on the jock table and notice Cason following my movements. He frowns when he sees I threw away my food, and I purposely throw the iced tea, letting it plant inside the trash bin with a big thud and make my way to stop by their table looking right at Jimmy.

He gives me a smirk. “What’s wrong, Aura? Don’t you like peanuts? They can taste good if you spread them.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “You really need to stop being so careless and pick your nuts up from the floor. They’re so tiny, they are scattering all over the place.”

Kalum chuckles, and Cason grins. I lower my voice. “And just so you know. You’re the last person I would ever spread my legs for, you nasty prick.”

Jimmy snickers, but I can tell by the twitch of his right eye that I hit a nerve by calling him nasty and announcing I would never give him the time of day. He’s attractive in a boyish, immature way, but so not my type. None of them are. I can’t stand them, and the bitch crew is even lower on my list.

I give Kalum one last glare before Jimmy says, “I hope you enjoyed your lunch.”

I raise my middle finger high enough in the air so he can see as I walk toward my next class.

3

Kalum

I watch her retreat out the cafeteria door, admiring the way her skirt hugs her small waist and the fabric moves up her ass. The girl must have a huge ass for her uniform to bunch up like that. I see her trying to lower it so she doesn't flash everyone, and just thinking about it makes my cock strain in my uniform trousers. Fuck, she's hot. When I saw her in my kitchen bent over to look in the refrigerator, I leaned on the counter to admire the view, hoping I could get a glimpse.

When she straightened, I could tell the top was too tight over her chest, telling me she has a big rack. My eyes lingered over her until I reached beautifully shaped brows, a slender nose, and the most kissable mouth I had ever seen. I couldn't believe this was the seventeen-year-old my parents hired as our new housekeeper. I don't know the details, but I do know that she turns eighteen in a couple of months.

When she asked me for a ride, there was no way I could be close to her in the confinement of my car. I wouldn't make it the three-mile drive to school with her so close. I don't know what the hell is wrong with me. I never lose my mind over a girl. I'm Kalum St. Claire, starting linebacker for Spencer Academy, and I can fuck any chick I want.

All I have to do is snap my fingers, and one appears. It's most likely why Sarah is on my dick. She is always trying to get me to have sex with her. Sarah is your typical snooty rich girl with blond hair and classical features, but she is no Aura.

"That's fucked up, Jimmy," Cason says disappointedly.

I look up to see what he's complaining about.

Jimmy shrugs. "I think I'm in love."

I give him a glare because Jimmy saying that means he wants to stick his dick in her.

He smirks at me. "What? Who cares. Besides, Kalum, you said she is just the help. Who gives three fucks about her anyway?"

"She didn't even get to eat," Cason chides.

"Aw. Catching feelings already from slumming it."

"Fuck you, Jimmy," Cason snaps.

Wanting to know what he said to her, I take the opportunity and ask, "Yo, Case. What were you telling her in the line?"

He swipes his hand over his face. "Nothing."

Why is he evading the question? Alarm bells go off in my head. What am I missing here?

"She lives in my house, asshole. I need to know what you told her and what she said."

"Nothing, Kalum. It's no big deal. She didn't do anything."

I give him a hard stare, and he sighs. "I paid for her lunch, alright?" he confesses.

What the fuck? He paid for her lunch. My stomach sinks. I know I was a total dick to her this morning, but another guy paying for Aura's anything just doesn't sit well with me.

"Why?" I ask with a hard edge to my voice.

He gives me a hard stare, and I raise a brow. He knows I'm pissed, and he looks nervous.

"I didn't think it was cool for her to worry if the price of water or iced tea was too high. She obviously can't afford to pay for her own lunch. She hardly had anything on her plate." He points at Jimmy. "And asswipe over here made sure she felt uncomfortable enough that she ended up throwing it all away. I put five hundred on her lunch account, so she didn't have to worry. I was trying to be nice."

"How noble of you. I hope you don't think this means you get to fuck Kalum's maid now," Jimmy says sarcastically.

"Shut the fuck up, Jimmy," I snap. Jimmy shuts his mouth, clearly realizing I'm not fucking around. I'm bigger, and I have

more size than they do, and everyone knows I have a bad temper, so they tread carefully around me.

My head spins as I imagine Cason with her. I just met her hours ago, but here I am playing with my emotions. I take out my phone, using the opportunity not to allow Cason or anyone to buy Aura anything. I send five hundred dollars through the Pay app, electronically sending Cason the money.

His phone vibrates, and he scowls when he opens the notification. "I don't want the money back. I didn't tell you to send it to me."

"I don't need my parents breathing down my neck about you covering her lunch," I say

with a bite in my tone. "It's bad enough she's living with me."

"I hope you talk them into forgetting about the whole thing," Sarah chimes in.

I push Sarah off me to give me distance. The perfume she wears is starting to get to me. *Liar*. What really bothers me is the way Cason is acting about Aura.

"You should start worrying about her three-mile hike to and from school every day. The poor girl said she needed water so she could hydrate. You are such an asshole, Kalum. I'm

positive she didn't do anything to you for you to treat her like shit."

"Stay away from her. She is not your problem, but mine," I growl. Sarah whips her hair around and faces me. "Why are you so bothered about it, Kalum?"

I give her a hard stare. "Stay out of it, Sarah."

She pouts and turns around with a huff. Good. I don't need her jealousy crap right now. Aura is a pain in my ass. I didn't ask to babysit a chick that is eventually going to clean my underwear. Fuck. Just thinking about her touching anything that encases my dick on a

daily basis turns me the fuck on. I flew right past her while she was walking, hoping her skirt

would lift to get a glimpse, but I was disappointed. I'm dying to get a glimpse of her plump ass. My mind wonders if she is wearing boy shorts, a thong, or regular panties. I never would have thought my mother would agree to have someone who looked like her living in my house.

Cason was eye fucking her. At first, I thought he was curious about Aura, but the way he acts when I'm giving him shit about her tells me all that I need to know. Cason likes her.

Brian glanced briefly at her, and I know it's because of Wendy that he didn't full-blown

gawk at her. When Aura walks into a room, she is totally unaware of the effect she has on guys.

4

Aura

It's the end of the day, and I dread the three-mile walk to the St. Claire's house. I can't say it's home because I don't have a home. After my long walk-through mansion road as I call it, I have to work for four hours cleaning the second floor, which includes Kalum's room and bathroom. I wonder if he is messy or a clean freak.

I'm lost in my thoughts when I open my locker, swinging the metal door open, and do a double take. There, sitting in all its glory, is a cold can of iced tea and a warm sandwich. I lean back slightly over the door of the locker to see if anyone is watching me or to give me a hint of who could have placed the food there but come up empty. It's just people trying to get their stuff and leave for the day.

I check the lock on the door. Whoever placed the food inside knows how to get in my locker without the code. When I grab the warm sandwich, I notice it's a melted swiss and turkey sub that has my stomach growling in protest. It smells so good my mouth waters.

Looking at the wrapper, I notice that it's from a sub place and not the cafeteria, and I wonder if it was Cason. He figured I liked the iced tea, and I remember him frowning when I had to throw away my lunch because of Jimmy and his immature bullshit.

Closing the locker with a thud, I make my way with the sandwich and iced tea in hand, quickly opening the wrapper and taking the first bite. I outwardly groan at how good and perfect it tastes. It was exactly what I needed.

When I make it out of the parking lot, I see a familiar black Rolls-Royce parked in the student parking lot. The driver quickly exits and gives me a grin.

"Miss Rayne?" he drawls.

I slow my steps and swallow the bite of food I had in my mouth. "Yes."

"I am here to take you home." He opens the back passenger door and waits for me to enter the vehicle.

"Oh, I think you are mistaken. I wasn't waiting to be driven anywhere."

Who could have called for a driver? I place the can of iced tea under my arm and retrieve my phone to see if I have any missed messages.

When I see there aren't any, I look up. "I'm sorry, but no one has let me know that they sent you to pick me up."

He smiles. "I can assure you the St. Claires have requested me to take you home."

I recognized him from the first time I was taken to the St. Claire's house, and since the ride is requested from them, I don't want to argue or give cause for Mr. and Mrs. St. Claire to be upset with me. I slide inside the luxury cabin of the car, and like the first time, the smell of fresh, expensive leather assaults me.

I have never been inside a car so luxurious before meeting the St. Claires and quickly wrap my sandwich up to avoid making a mess in such a beautiful car. My parents always had one car, and it was a used Honda with no leather or any luxury this vehicle offers. The driver takes us out onto the road, and the ride is short since it's only three miles long.

I enter the pristine home so over the top with marble floors and expensive vases with an iron accented spiral grand staircase you see in celebrity houses on TV.

I walk up the staircase and enter my room to get ready and clean the second floor like Mrs. St. Claire instructed me to.

After cleaning the hallway bathroom and making sure everything is in place, I look over to a closed door that must be Kalum's room. Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes briefly and turn the intricate knob, watching the door slowly swing open. My eyes scan the football trophies lining the wall of the massive bedroom.

Looking around, I realize his king-size four-poster bed is unmade. There is a pile of clothes in one corner and a huge mess

on a wooden desk that must be where he does his homework.

Walking farther inside, I inhale the scent of his cologne mixed with a scent that is all male. This is what he must smell like up close, and if I'm being honest, it's attractive. If I compared the scent of Kalum to Marcus, there is just no comparison. Kalum smells expensive and dangerous. Marcus is just, well, Marcus. Typical teenage football player and the star quarterback of Spencer Public High School.

I begin to work stripping the sheets of Kalum's bed, hoping I don't find something that will scar me for the rest of my life like a used condom, and place the comforter with sheets in separate piles. Placing my headphones in my ears, I play "24/7" featuring Ella Mai and start singing along as I get to the pillows next.

Swaying my hips, I grab the caddy just outside the door and begin to wipe his nightstand. My brows furrow when I notice a cell phone plugged into the charger. Awareness snakes down my spine, and I realize I'm not alone.

The air in the room has changed, and it's charged with an energy I can't place. The smell of clean body wash that matches the scent of cologne assaults me. I turn my head and jolt, dropping the rag in my hand.

I place my hand over my chest and take my headphones off. "You scared me," I say breathlessly.

Standing in all his shirtless glory with a white towel wrapped around his waist is Kalum leaning against the doorjamb, tilting his head with a brow raised. Are those tattoos all over his arms and chest?

Come on, Aura, get a grip.

"I-I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were home." I lower my gaze so he doesn't notice I'm staring at him.

He pushes off the doorway and walks farther into the room, and my eyes move, looking at the floor. I have never seen a man naked in person before, but Kalum St. Claire is all man, and the lower half of me recognizes it. The man is beautiful. Everywhere. He is gorgeous with a chiseled body, but he has the worst attitude when he speaks.

My cheeks heat. I bend my knees, lowering slowly to pick up the rag and turn to keep wiping down the furniture, hoping he will go back and change in the bathroom, preferably with the door closed.

"What are you doing in here?"

I freeze and angle my head toward him, and he is still clad in the towel.

"What does it look like? I'm cleaning your room. It is what your mother had instructed me to do when I came home. I'm sorry. I didn't know you would be here. I was trying to be quick and get it done before you made it home."

"I didn't agree for you to clean my room, and I prefer you didn't unless I'm here. I don't want you going through my stuff." He opens a drawer and takes out some boxers, the ding of the brass handle sounding against hard wood when he slides the drawer closed.

I'm about to leave the room when he suddenly drops the towel, and my eyes widen when they land on his cock. Oh my God, he's huge. Everywhere. I'm stunned, not believing he would do something like that, but I'm more shocked at the sheer size of him.

I spin around. "What the hell, Kalum."

"Like I said, I didn't agree for you to clean my room. You're in my room, and I'm getting dressed."

"I could leave and come back," I quip.

"What's wrong, Aura? Are you nervous?"

"No. I'm just not interested in seeing you get dressed," I snap.

I *am* nervous. The guy looks like an Adonis with straight dark-brown hair, a perfect nose, a chiseled jaw that can cut my panties in half with a hard body and a cock that is freakishly big. His body makes me feel hot and wet. I have never seen a man naked except when I was curious and Googled what a man would look like without their clothes on, but I have to say, Kalum looks better. I have no one to compare his cock to because I've never been intimate with a man before. The most Marcus and I have done is kiss, and he felt me up on my breast my junior year when he drove me home. We were kissing, and he began to lower his hand and touch my breasts, but it didn't feel right, so I made an excuse for him to stop. Marcus was understanding and patient. He respected my wishes, and that made me like him even more.

He scoffs, "Yeah, right. Every girl does."

"Well, I'm not every girl, and I have a boyfriend."

He chuckles. "Yeah, I'm sure he takes great care of you. That's why you're here cleaning my room. Please. I'm almost positive he hasn't called you since you got here and is most likely balls deep in pussy."

I flinch because he is right. Marcus hasn't called me to see if I arrived. Gina texted me that she was busy with school and would text me later, but she never did.

"You're such a pig."

"No, I'm honest. If he hasn't called, it's because you're easy to forget. Don't get all high and mighty with me like you're too good for me or some shit. You don't have to worry about me because I don't fuck ugly chicks."

Trying not to look at his chest, I look him straight in the eyes. "At least we can agree we both find each other unattractive."

His eyes flicker with something I can't describe. Like it bothers him for me to find him unattractive.

"Good. I'm glad we understand each other. Now clean my room and get out."

My eyes sting. Kalum has been such an ass since I got here, and I have done nothing for him to act like that toward me.

Grabbing the sheets that I piled on the floor, I head to the laundry room, blinking back the tears threatening to spill. I refuse to cry in front of him.

I place the soiled sheets and pour the soap inside the washer, and when I close the washing machine door, a sob I was trying to keep at bay escapes. The tears spill, and I sniff, missing my mother and my father desperately. How could this have happened?

How could my life be turned upside down? One minute, I'm happy with my parents, my boyfriend, my best friend at school, and in a split second, I've lost my parents and everything I have ever known, leaving me with practically no money, no home, and a job as a housekeeper to a privileged family with a rich snob for a son who apparently hates the fact that I'm here.

5

Kalum

She practically ran out of my room with my sheets, and I could have sworn I saw tears in her eyes. Dropping the towel and appearing naked before her was a bold move. Making her feel uncomfortable was my first thought, but maybe I'd been seeking her reaction.

When I saw her swaying her hips, oblivious that I was standing in the doorway of my bathroom, I was mesmerized by her body in tight black leggings and a T-shirt tied in a knot at her waist. I was right. Aura has an amazing hourglass shape with ass and tits for days. When she turned around, sensing me watching her standing there, my eyes dipped to large breasts.

She looked like she belonged in my room with her messy bun, like she has been cleaning my room for years, not as a housekeeper, but as my girl because she wanted to.

When she told me she found me unattractive and had a boyfriend, I saw red. I smirked because I was jealous, and all I wanted her to do was forget he existed. He doesn't deserve her. What guy would let their girlfriend accept this arrangement? Why did her parents let her go? What type of parents let another stranger adopt them to be a housekeeper once they turn eighteen in a few months? It's none of my business, but now I'm curious.

Getting close to my bedroom door, I walk slowly in case she walks back into my room. When I am sure she isn't walking this way, I peer my head out and look toward the laundry room.

When the machine pauses, switching cycles, I can hear faint sniffing. Is she crying? She turns sideways, not realizing I'm watching her like a creep, and something breaks inside me. Fresh, hot tears stream down her face, and she sobs.

The instinct inside me has me approaching her. I never intended to make her cry. Something about the way she cries tears me apart. I wonder which part of the messed-up things I said caused her to cry.

When I take long strides down the hallway, her eyes widen, glistening. She quickly wipes her tears and looks away.

Between a sob and a sniff, she asks, "Is there something you need?"

"I need you to look at me," I demand.

She turns her face, and the look of sorrow laced with pain guts me. I'm not a softy by any means, and a girl crying doesn't do it for me, but somehow, Aura crying is like a knife twisting painfully inside my soul.

Another tear escapes down her beautiful face. Aura is breathtakingly gorgeous. Telling her she was ugly was me being an ass because she wasn't giving me the reaction I'm used to receiving with other girls.

My thumb softly wipes away her tears. She stands still, and I'm relieved she lets me. The soft touch of her skin shoots an electric current up my hand directly to my cock.

Leaning close so my lips are close to her ear, I whisper, "I'm sorry to have made you cry. I'm an ass sometimes."

I lean closer to her cheek and place my lips there, feeling the salty wetness. My eyes close as I smell the soft, flowery scent coming off her skin. The way she looks is perfect. She's perfect. "If something I said crossed the line, I'm sorry."

Her eyes find mine again, and up close, her light-brown eyes are striking. I could get lost in them, and it scares the shit out of me. The feelings Aura evokes inside me have me all types of fucked up. When she walks in the room, my eyes follow her like lasers finding a target.

We stand there looking into each other's eyes until she breaks the spell. "It wasn't my choice to be here. I'm sorry for barging into your life. I can tell you don't like the fact that I'm here, but neither do I."

Her words are like a blast of cold air when you're trying to keep warm. Standing back, I give her space. She wipes her face and takes a deep breath, trying to compose herself.

"I'll stay out of your way as much as possible. You won't even know I'm here. I-I appreciate your apology."

Not the words I expected to hear. Hearing them should make me feel better, but I feel none of those things. But telling her it's okay will make her think I want her around and that I have changed my mind about her staying here. If she was not attending my school or having her so close and cleaning my room, maybe I wouldn't care.

In the morning, I seek my mother out before I leave for school. I find her seated, reading the latest magazine, catching up on gossip. She hears me approach and lowers the magazine. Her eyes find mine, and she smiles.

"Good morning, Kalum. How was the first day of school? I hope you helped Aura feel welcome and showed her around."

I lean on the edge of the sofa. "Good morning, Mom. Actually, that is what I wanted to talk to you about."

Her eyes blink fast, a telltale sign she is nervous. "Is everything okay with Aura? You have to make sure she is okay, Kalum. I know I've sprung this on you, but—"

I'm annoyed with her for not telling me her plans to bring a girl my age to live in my house, enroll her in my school, and let her invade my life. I interrupt her.

"Where did she come from? And why is she attending my school?"

My mother sits up straight. "Watch how you talk to me, young man. You may be turning eighteen in two weeks, but you'll respect me and not question my decisions in my own home."

"You know I don't intervene with your projects or whatever you plan, but I do have a problem when it involves my life. This is my senior year; you and Dad want me to take up college and eventually take over the business, and I'm fine with that. I have never told you no, but accepting a strange girl in our home and invading my space is taking things too far. I don't want her cleaning my room or attending my school. Out of all the people you could have hired, why her?"

My mother raises her hands and drops them in her lap. "Because she has nowhere else to go, Kalum."

"What is this? A charity case? I know you like to help in the community, but that is her parents' job to worry about. Not yours."

"They're dead," she says quietly.

My thoughts instantly go to the girl I have treated like shit since I first laid eyes on her and then the way the guys have treated her. The way Sarah threatened her. If provoked, Sarah and her little crew of friends could cause a lot of trouble for Aura.

Then the memory of Aura's words come back. She said if she had a choice, she wouldn't be here. It means there aren't many options or none at all.

"I'm sorry to have thrown this on you at the last minute, but Aura has no other family. Her parents were all she had. Camila has known Aura since she was a child and knew her parents very well. She will be eighteen in three months. After the bank sold off her home and their car, leaving her with nothing, the judge granted me temporary custody for ninety days until she is an adult. She can work only four hours a day until she graduates in three months. Then after she would be offered the position on our household staff. That was the agreement. She has nowhere to go, and I couldn't say no. You know how that would make us look."

I nod, feeling like a piece of shit. Here I am with both my parents, living the best life, with all the luxuries a person could want, when other people mourn the loss of not only one parent but two. I know my mother isn't all that bad and means well. She is hiring Aura to clean. What is more irritating is that she is more worried about how people see us as a family for turning down a poor girl in need. In my mother's mind, word would get around, and she would be ridiculed for being a snob. It's not Aura she really cares about. It's her image.

Taking a deep breath, I ask, "How did they die?"

My mother's eyes soften. "A car accident. They died instantly. Aura was waiting for them to come home after making them dinner. According to Camila, she would always make them dinner when they worked late."

I nod, feeling like a bigger dick than last night when I basically told her that her boyfriend didn't care about her and is fucking some other chick because she was forgettable. She wasn't crying because of what I said. She was crying because she misses her parents and hates it here. Which means she must hate me for how I treated her, and I can't blame her. I would hate me too.

"I understand."

She stands to walk me out the front door so I can head out to school. She looks around outside and frowns.

"Where's Aura?" my mother asks.

Shit. I forgot that I told her to walk to school because I don't give rides to the hired help. Cason's words about her walking haunt me. Looking guilty, I gaze at my mother over the roof of my black Lamborghini, seeing her murderous expression. She knows something is up when I don't answer.

"Kalum St. Claire, tell me where Aura is right now," she demands.

Even if I'm six foot three and built like a house, my mother can still make me feel like a mouse with her hard tone.

Wincing, I tell her. "I-I kind of told her that I don't give rides to the hired help and that she could walk to school."

"Are you fucking crazy?"

My mother never curses. But what gets me is that she isn't mad about her walking to school.

My eyes narrow. "It was only to school. I told Henry to pick her up after school after I realized how messed up it sounded."

Crossing her arms over her chest, I know she's upset. "If something happens to that girl because of you, you will be held responsible. You will go and explain to a judge why you were careless and let her get hurt. It will fall on you; now get in that

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SEA LEGS ***

SEA LEGS

By FRANK QUATTROCCHI

Illustrated by EMSH

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Rootless and footloose, a man in space can't help
but dream of coming home. But something nobody should
do is bet on the validity of a homesick dream!

Flight Officer Robert Craig surrendered the tube containing his service record tapes and stood waiting while the bored process clerk examined the seal.

"Your clearance," said the clerk.

Craig handed him a battered punch card and watched the man insert it in the reproducer. He felt anxiety as the much-handled card refused for a time to match the instrument's metal contact points. The line of men behind Craig fidgeted.

"You got to get this punched by Territorial," said the clerk. "Take it back to your unit's clearance office."

"Look again, Sergeant," Craig said, repressing his irritation.

"It ain't notched."

"The hell it isn't."

The man examined the card with squinting care and nodded finally. "It's so damn notched," he complained. "You ought to take care of that card; can't get on without one."

Craig hesitated before moving.

"Next," said the clerk, "What you waiting for?"

"Don't I take my 201 file?"

"We send it on ahead. Go to Grav 1 desk."

A murmur greeted the order. Craig experienced the thrill of knowing the envy of the others. Grav 1—that meant Terra. He crossed the long, dreary room, knowing the eyes of the other men were upon him.

"Your service tapes," the next noncom said. "Where you going?"

"Grav 1—Terra," fumbled Craig. "Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles, eh? Where in Los Angeles?"

"I—I—" Craig muttered, fumbling in his pockets.

"No specific destination," supplied the man as he punched a key on a small instrument, "Air-lock ahead and to your right. Strip and follow the robot's orders. Any metal?"

"Metal?" asked Craig.

"You know, *metal*."

"Well, my identification key."

"Here," commanded the clerk, extending a plastic envelope.

Craig moved in the direction indicated. He fought the irrational fear that he had missed an important step in the complicated clerical process. He cursed the grudging attitude of the headquarters satellite personnel and felt the impotence of a spaceman who had long forgotten the bureaucracy of a rear area base. The knowledge that much of it was motivated by envy soothed him as he clumsily let himself into the lock.

"Place your clothing in the receptacle provided and assume a stationary position on the raised podium in the center of the lock."

Craig obeyed the robot voice and began reluctantly to remove his flight jacket. Its incredibly fine-grained leather would carry none of the strange, foreign associations for the base station clerk who would appropriate it. He would never know the beautiful, gentle beast that supplied this skin.

"You are retarding the progress of others. Please respond more quickly to your orders."

Craig quickly removed the last of his clothing. It was impossible to hate a robot, but one could certainly hate those who set it into operation.

"You will find a red button at your feet. Lower your head and depress that button."

Stepping on the button with his bare foot produced an instant of brilliant blue illumination. A small scratch on his arm stung briefly and he was somewhat blinded by the flash even through his eyelids, but that was all there was to the sterilizing process.

"Your clothing and effects will be in the dressing room immediately beyond the locked door."

He found his clothing cleanly and neatly hung on plastic hangers just inside the door to the dressing room. The few personal items he carried in his pockets were still there. The Schtann flight jacket was actually there, looking like new, its space-blue unfaded and as wonderfully pliant as before.

"Insert your right arm into the instrument on the central table," commanded the same voice he had heard before. "Turn your arm until the scratch is in contact with the metal plate. There will be a slight pain, but it is necessary to treat the small injury you have been disregarding."

Craig obeyed and clenched his teeth against a sharp stinging. His respect for the robot-controlled equipment of bases had risen. When he withdrew his arm, the scratch was neatly coated with a layer of flesh-colored plastic material.

He dressed quickly and was on the verge of asking the robot for instructions, when a man appeared in the open doorway.

"I am Captain Wyandotte," said the man in a pleasant voice.

"Well, what's next?" asked Craig somewhat more belligerently than he had intended.

The man smiled. "Your reaction is quite natural. You are somewhat aggressive after Clerical, eh?"

"I'm a little anxious to get home, I suppose," said Craig defensively.

"By 'home' you mean Terra. But you've never been there, have you?"

"No, but my father—"

"Your parents left Terra during the Second Colonization of Cassiopeia II, didn't they?"

"Yes," Craig said. He was uncomfortable; Wyandotte seemed to know all about him.

"We might say you've been away quite a while, eh?"

"I was entered as a spaceman when I was 16," Craig said. "I've never been down for any period as yet."

"You mean you haven't been in a gravity system?"

"Oh, I've landed a few times, even walked around for a while...."

"With the help of paraoxylnebutal," supplied the captain.

"Well, sure."

"Mr. Craig, I suppose you've guessed that the next step in our little torture system here is psych."

"So I gathered."

The captain laughed reassuringly. "No, don't put up your guard again. The worst is over. Short of Gravitational conditioning, there is nothing to stop you from going to Terra."

"Sorry, I guess I'm a little touchy. This is my first time...."

"Quite natural. But it being your first time—in quite a number of ways, I might add—it will be necessary for you to undergo some conditioning."

"Conditioning?" asked Craig.

"Yes. You have spent eleven years in space. Your body is conditioned to a normal state of free fall, or at best to a state of acceleration."

"Yeah, I know. Once on Gerymeade...."

"You were ill, couldn't keep your balance, felt dizzy. That is why all spacemen carry PON, paraoxylnebutal, with them. It helps suppress certain physiological reactions to an entirely new set of conditions. Channels of the ear, for example. They play an important part in our awareness of balance. They operate on a simple gravity principle. Without gravity they act up for a time, then gradually lose function. Returning to gravity is rather frightening at first."

"I know all about this, Captain."

"You've undoubtedly read popularizations in tapezines. But you have experienced it briefly."

"I expect to have some trouble at first." Craig was disturbed by the wordy psychologist. What was the man actually saying?

"Do you know what sailors of ancient times meant by 'sea legs?'" asked Wyandotte. "Men on a rolling ocean acclimated themselves to a rolling horizontal. They had trouble when they went ashore and the horizontal didn't roll any more.

"It meant more than that. There were excellent psychological reasons for the old stereotype, the 'drunken sailor.' A port city was a frightening thing to an old sailor—but let's begin our little job at the beginning. I'll turn you over to psychometry for the usual tests and pick you up tomorrow morning at, say, 0900."

During the days that followed, the psychologist seemed to Craig to become progressively more didactic. He would deliver long speeches about the "freedom of open space." He spoke repetitiously of the "growing complexity of Terran society." And yet the man could not

be pinned down to any specific condition the spaceman would find intolerable.

Craig began to hate the delay that kept him from Terra. Through the ports of the headquarters base satellite, he scanned the constellations for the scores of worlds he had visited during his eleven years in space. They were incredibly varied, even those that supported life. He had weathered difficult landings on worlds with rip-tide gravities, had felt the pull of the incredible star-tides imparted by twin and even triple star systems. He had been on Einstein IV, the planet of eight moons, and had felt the pulse of all eight of the satellites at once that no PON could completely nullify.

But even if he could accept the psychologist's authority for the cumulative effect of a gravity system, he could not understand the unspoken warning he felt underlying all that the man said.

"Of course it has changed," Craig was protesting. "Anyway, I never really knew very much about Terra. So what? I know it won't be as it was in tapezines either."

"Yet you are so completely sure you will want to live out your life there, that you are willing to give up space service for it."

"We've gone through this time and time again," Craig said wearily. "I gave you my reasons for quitting space. We analyzed them. You agreed that you could not decide that for me and that my decision is logical. You tell me spacemen don't settle down on Terra. Yet you won't—or can't—tell me why. I've got a damned good job there—"

"You may find that 'damned good jobs' become boring."

"So I'll transfer. I don't know what you're trying to get at, Captain, but you're not talking me out of going back. If the service needs men so badly, let them get somebody else. I've put in *my* time."

"Do you really think that's my reason?"

"Sure. What else can it be?"

"Mr. Craig," the psychologist said slowly, "you have my authorization for you to return to Terra as a private citizen of that planet. You will be given a very liberal supply of PON—which you will definitely need. Good luck. You'll need that too."

On the eighth day, two attendants, who showed the effects of massive doses of PON to protect themselves from the centrifugal force, had to carry a man out of the tank. Many others asked to be removed, begged to be allowed to withdraw their resignations.

"The twelfth day is the worst," a grizzled spaceman told Craig. "That's when the best of 'em want out."

Craig clenched the iron rung of his bed and struggled to bring the old man's face into focus.

"How ... how do they know when you ought ... to come out?" he asked between waves of nausea.

"Blood pressure. They get you just before you go into shock."

"How can they tell?" Craig fought down his growing panic. "I can't."

"That strap around your belly. You mean you ain't noticed it?"

"Haven't noticed much of anything."

"Well, it's keyed to give them some kind of signal."

The old man lapsed into silence. Craig wished him to continue. He desperately wanted something to distract his mind from the ghastly conditioning process.

Slowly at first, the lines formed by seams in the metal ceiling began to bend. Here it came again!

"Old man!" shouted Craig.

"Yeah, son. They've dropped it down a notch."

"Dropped ... it ... down?"

"Maybe that ain't scientific, but it's the way I always think of it."

"Can't they ... drop it down continuously?"

"They tried that a few times—once when I was aboard. You wouldn't like it, kid. You wouldn't like it at all."

"How ... many times ... do they drop it?"

"Four times during the day, three at night. Twenty days."

A nightmare of visual sensations ebbed into Craig's mind. He was vaguely aware of the moans of other men in the vaultlike room. Wave upon wave of nausea swept him as he watched the seam lines bend and warp fantastically. He snapped his eyelids shut, only to begin feeling the nightmarish bodily sensations once more. He felt the cot slowly rise longitudinally, felt himself upside down, then the snap of turning right side up once more—and he knew that neither he nor the cot had moved so much as an inch.

Craig heard the voices around him, muffled, as though talking through wadding.

"... got it bad."

"We better take him out."

"... pretty bad."

"He'll go into shock."

"... never make it the twelfth."

"We better yank him."

"I'm ... all right," Craig mumbled at the voices. He struggled with the bonds of his cot. With terrible effort he forced his eyes open. Two white-clad figures, ridiculously out of proportion, hovered wraithlike over him. Four elongated eyes peered at him.

Attendants coming for to take me home....

"Touch me and I'll kick your teeth in!" he yelled. "I'm going to Terra. Wish you were going to Terra?"

Then it was better. Oddly, he passed the twelfth day easily. By the fourteenth day, Craig knew he could stand Grav 1. The whine of the centrifuge's motors had diminished to a low hum. Either that or they had begun to produce ultra-sonic waves. Craig was not sure.

Most of the men had passed through the torments of gravitational conditioning. The huge headquarters base centrifuge aboard the man-made satellite had gradually caused their bodies to respond

once more to a single source of pull. They were now ready to become inhabitants of planets again, instead of free-falling ships.

On the eighteenth day, automatic machinery freed them from their imprisoning cots. Clumsily and awkwardly at first, the men began to walk, to hold their heads and arms in proper attitudes. They laughed and joked about it and kidded those who were slow at adjusting. Then they again began taking paraoxylnebutal in preparation for the free-fall flight to Terra.

Only one of the score of men in the centrifuge tank remained voluntarily in his cot.

"Space article violator," the old man informed Craig. "Psycho, I think. Went amuck with some extraterritorials. Killed a dozen."

"What will they do, exile him?"

"Not to Chociante, if that's what you mean. They just jerked his space card and gave him a one-way ticket to Terra."

"For twelve murders?" asked Craig incredulously.

"That's enough, son." The old man eyed Craig for an instant before looking away. "Pick something to talk about. What do you figure on doing when you get to Terra, for instance?"

"I'm going into Import. My father was in it for twenty years."

"Sure," said the old spaceman, watching a group of young crewmen engaged in an animated conversation.

"It's a good job. There's a future to it."

"Yeah."

Why did he have to explain anything at all to the old space tramp?

"Once I get set up, I'll probably try to open my own business."

"And spend your weekends on Luna."

Craig half rose from his cot, jarred into anger.

But the old spaceman turned, smiling wryly. "Don't get hot, kid. I guess I spent too long in Zone V." He paused to examine his wrinkled hands. They were indelibly marked with lever callouses. "You get to thinking anyone who stays closer'n eighty light years from Terra is a land-lubber."

Craig relaxed, realizing he had acted childishly. "Used to think the same. Then I took the exam and got this job."

"Whereabouts?"

"Los Angeles."

The old man looked up at Craig. "You don't know much about Terra, do you, son?"

"Not much."

"Yeah. Well, I hope you ain't disappointed."

"My father was born there, but I never saw it. Never hit the Solar System, matter of fact. Never saw much of anything close up. I stood it a long time, old man, this hitting atmospheres all over the Universe."

But the spaceman seemed to have lost interest. He was unpacking some personal belongings from a kit.

"What are you doing in Grav 1?" Craig asked.

The old man's face clouded for an instant. "In the old days, they used to say us old-timers acted like clocks. They used to say we just ran down. Now they got some fancy psychology name for it."

Craig regretted his question. He would have muttered some word of apology, but the old man continued.

"Maybe you've read some of the old sea stories, or more'n likely had 'em read to you. Sailors could go to sea until they just sort of dried up. The sea tanned their skins and stiffened their bones, but it never stiffened their hearts. When they got old, it just pulled them in.

"But space is different. Space is raw and new. It tugs at your guts. It sends the blood rushing through your veins. It's like loving. You don't become a part of space the way you do the old sea, though. It leaves you strictly alone. Except that it sucks you dry, takes all the soup out of you, leaves you brittle and old—old as a dehydrated piece of split leather.

"Then one day it shoots a spurt of blood around in one of your old veins. Something gives. Space is through with you then. And if you can stand this whirligig conditioning, you're through with space."

"*You can't figure it. Some of 'em urp all over and turn six shades of green.*"

"*You got to watch the ones that don't.*"

"*Yeah, you got to watch the ones that don't. Especially the old ones.*"

"*He's old. You think it was his heart?*"

"*Who knows?*"

"*They'll dump him, won't they?*"

"*After a tracer is sent through. But it won't do any good.*"

"*He probably outlived everybody that ever knew him.*"

"*Wouldn't be surprised. Here, grab his leg.*"

Robert Craig folded the flight jacket tightly and stuffed it into the cylindrical carton. A sleeve unwound just as he did so, making it difficult to fit into the place he had made for it. Exasperated, he refolded it and jammed it in place. Smaller rolls of underclothing were then fitted in. When he was satisfied with the layer, he tossed

in a small handful of crystals and began to fill the next layer. After the carton was completely filled, he ignited the sealing strip and watched as the plastic melted into a single, seamless whole. It was ready for irradiation. Probably in another ten years his son-to-be would put it on and play spaceman. But Craig swore he'd make sure that the kid knew what a stinking life it was.

At 1300 hours, the ferry bumped heavily alongside the starboard lock. It was the signal for relief in the passengers' quarters; many were beginning to feel a reaction to the short free-fall flight from the headquarters satellite.

The audio called out: "Flight Officer Robert Craig. Flight Officer Robert Craig. Report to Orderly 12. Report to Orderly 12 through the aft door."

With pangs of anxiety he could not completely suppress, Craig obeyed.

Orderly 12 handed him a message container.

"Who's it from? Somebody on Terra?"

"From a private spaceman named Morgan Brockman."

"*Brockman?*"

"He was with you in the grav tank."

"The old man!"

The message container produced a battered punch card. Craig straightened it and was about to reach into his pocket for a hand transcriber. But then he noticed the card bore only a few irregular punches and was covered with rough hand printing.

Son, when the flunkies get around to giving you this, they'll have shot me out the tube. How do I know? Same way you know when your turbos are going to throw a blade. It's good this way.

There's something you can do for me if you want to. Way back, some fifty years ago, there was a woman. She was my wife. It's a

long story I won't bother you with. Anyway, I left her. Wanted to take her along with me, but she wouldn't go.

Earth was a lot different then than it is now. They don't have to tell me; I know. I saw it coming and so did Ethel. We talked about it and I knew I had to go. She wouldn't or couldn't go. Wanted me to stay, but I couldn't.

I tried to send her some units once in a while. Don't know if she ever got them. Sometimes I forgot to send them at all. You know, you're way out across the Galaxy, while she's home.

Go see her if you can, son. Will you? Make sure she gets the unit transfer I made out. It isn't much out of seventy years of living, but she may need it. And maybe you can tell her a little bit about what it means to be out there. Tell her it's open and free and when you got hold of those levers and you're trying for an orbit on something big and new and green.... Hell, you remember. You know how to tell her.

Her name is Ethel Brockman. I know she'll still use my name. Her address is or was East 71, North 101, Number 4. You can trace her easy if she moved. Women don't generally shove off and not leave a forwarding address. Not Ethel, at least.

Craig put the battered card in his pocket and walked back through the door to the passenger room. How did you explain to an old woman why her husband deserted her fifty years before? Some kind of story about one's duty to the Universe? No, the old man had not been in Intergalactic. He had been a tramp spaceman. Well, why *had* he left?

Fifty years in space. *Fifty* years! Zone V had been beyond anybody's imagination that long ago. He must have been in on the first Cetusian flights and shot the early landings in Cetus II. God only knew how many times he had battled Zone 111b pirates....

Damn the old man! How did one explain?

Craig descended the ramp from the huge jet and concentrated on his impressions. One day he would recall this moment, his first on the planet Terra. He tried to recall his first thrill at seeing Los Angeles, 1500 square miles of it, from the ship as it entered the atmosphere.

He was about to step off the last step when a man appeared hurriedly. A rather plump man, he displayed a toothy smile on his puffy red face.

"A moment, sir. Just a little greeting from the Terra. You understand, of course. Purely routine."

Craig remained on the final step of the ramp, puzzled. The man turned to a companion at his right.

"We can see that this gentleman has come from a long, long way off, can't we?"

The other man did not look up. He was peering into what seemed to Craig to be a kind of camera.

"We can allow the gentlemen to continue now, can't we? It wasn't that we believed for a minute, you understand ... purely routine."

Both men were gone in an instant, leaving Craig completely bewildered.

"You goin' to move on, buddy, or you want to go back?"

Craig turned to face a line of his fellow passengers up the ramp behind him.

"Who was that?" Craig asked.

"Customs. Bet you never got such a smooth screening before, eh?"

"You mean he *screened* me? What for?"

"Hard to say," the other passenger said. "You'll get used to this. They get it over with quick."

Craig made his way toward the spaceport administration building. His first physical contact with Terra had passed unnoticed.

"Sir! Sir!" cried a voice behind him.

He wheeled to see a man walking briskly toward him.

"You dropped this, sir. Quite by accident, of course."

Craig examined the small object the man had given him before rushing off toward an exit.

It was an empty PON tube he had just discarded. He couldn't understand why the man had bothered until he realized that the plastaloid floor of the lobby displayed not the faintest scrap of paper nor trace of dirt.

The Import personnel man was toying with a small chip of gleaming metal. He did not look directly at Craig for more than an instant at a time, and commented on Craig's description of his trip through the city only very briefly between questions.

"It's a good deal bigger than I imagined," Craig was saying. "Haven't seen much of it, of course. Thought I'd check in here with you first."

"Yes, naturally."

"Thought you could give me some idea of conditions...."

"Conditions?"

"For instance, what part of the city I should live in. That is, what part is closest to where I'll work."

"I see," said the man noncommittally. It seemed to Craig that he was about to add something. He did not, however, but instead rose from his chair and walked to the large window overlooking an enormous section of the city far below. He stared out the window for a time, leaving Craig seated uncomfortably in the silent room. There was a distracted quality about him, Craig thought.

"You are the first man we have had from the Intergalactic Service," the personnel man said finally.

"That so?"

"Yes." He turned to face Craig briefly before continuing. "You must find it very strange here."

"Well, I've never seen a city so big."

"Yes, so big. And also...." He seemed to consider many words before completing the sentence. "And also different."

"I haven't been here very long," said Craig. "Matter of fact, I haven't been anywhere very long. This is my first real experience with life on a planet. As an adult, anyway."

The personnel man seated himself once more and pressed a button on a small instrument. A secretary entered the office from a door to Craig's left.

"Miss Wendel, this is Mr. Craig. Mr. Craig, my secretary. Mr. Craig will enter Minerals and Metals, Zone V."

They exchanged formal greetings. She was a moderately pretty girl of medium height and, to Craig, a pleasantly rounded figure. He would have attempted to catch her eye had she not immediately occupied herself with unfolding the legs of a small instrument she was carrying.

"This is Mr. Craig's first landing on Terra, Miss Wendel," the personnel man continued. "Actually, we shall have to consider him in much the same way we would an extraterrestrial."

The girl glanced at Craig, casting him a cool, impersonal smile.

"He was formerly a flight officer in the Intergalactic Space Service." The statement was delivered in an almost exaggeratedly casual tone.

The girl glanced at him once more, this time with a definite quizzical look in her brown eyes.

"Three complete tours of duty, I believe."

"Four," corrected Craig. "Four tours of three years each, minus a year's terminal leave."

"I take it you have no identification card?" the man asked.

"The one I held in the service. It's pretty comprehensive."

The other turned to the secretary. "You'll see that he is assisted in filing his application, won't you? A provisional Code II. That will enable you to enter all Import offices freely, Mr. Craig."

"Will he need a food and—clothing ration also?" asked the girl, without looking at Craig.

"Yes." The man laughed. "You'll excuse us, Mr. Craig. We realize that you couldn't be expected to be familiar with Terra's fashions. In your present outfit you would certainly be typed as a ... well, you'd be made uncomfortable."

Craig reddened in spite of himself. He had bought the suit on Ghandii.

"A hick," he supplied.

"I wouldn't go that far, but some people might."

Craig noted the pleasant way the girl filled her trim, rather severe business suit. He amused himself by calculating stress patterns in its plain woven material as she assembled the forms for him.

"Here, Mr. Craig. I believe these are complete."

"They look pretty complicated."

"Not at all. The questions are quite explicit."

Craig looked them over quickly.

"I guess so. Say, Miss Wendel, I was wondering—I don't know the city at all. Maybe you could go with me to have dinner. It must be almost dinnertime now. You could sort of check me out on some...."

"I'm afraid that would be quite impossible. You couldn't gain admittance to any office you need to visit tonight. Therefore, it is impossible for me to be of any assistance to you."

"Oh, come now, Miss Wendel. There are women aboard spaceships. I'm not a starved wolf."

"Certainly you are not, Mr. Craig. But it is not possible for me...."

"You said that already, but you can have dinner with me. Just company."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

The Galactic hotel strove to preserve an archaic tone of hospitality. It advertised "a night's lodgings" and it possessed a bellboy. The bellboy actually carried Craig's plasticarton and large file of punch cards and forms to his room. Tired from the long, confusing day, Craig was not impressed. He vaguely wondered if the little drama of the hotel carried so far as a small fee to be paid the bellboy, and he hoped he would have the right size of Terran units in his wallet.

Outside the door to the room, the bellboy stopped and turned to Craig.

"For five I'll tell you where it is," he said in a subdued tone.

"Tell me where what is?"

"You know, the mike."

"Mike?"

"All right, mister, three units, then. I wasn't trying to hold you up."

"You mean a microphone?" asked Craig, mechanically fishing for his wallet.

"Sure, they don't put in screens here. Wanted to, but the boss convinced 'em there aren't any Freedomites ever stay here."

"Where is the microphone?" Craig asked as he found a ten unit note. He was too puzzled to wonder what he was expected to do with the information.

"It's in the bed illuminator. You can short it out with a razor blade. Or I'll do it for another two."

"Never mind," Craig said wearily. He waited while the bellboy inserted a key into the door and opened it for him.

"I can get you a sensatia-tape," whispered the boy when they had entered. He nudged Craig wickedly. "You know what they're like?"

"Yeah," Craig said disgustedly. Traffic in the illicit mental-image tapes was known as far into space as lonely men had penetrated. Intergalactic considered them as great a menace to mental and moral stability as the hectopiates. Craig wearily got the man out of the room, took a PON pill, and eased himself into the bed.

It had been a weird day and he had not liked it. There was no telling how long it would take him to shake his—sea legs, the psychologist had called it. One thing was sure: Terra aggressively went after its strangers.

Ushered into the room by a sullen and silent secretary, Craig found himself facing a semi-circular table at which were seated five uniformed men. The center man, obviously their superior, rose to greet him. He wore the familiar smile Craig had come to know so well and hate so much. The man was somewhat over forty years old, short, stout, entirely unpleasant and puffy.

"Mr. Craig, I believe," he greeted Craig. Since it seemed to be more of a statement than a question, Craig did not answer. He took up a position of more or less military attention at the center of the curved table.

"You *are* Robert Craig," insisted the man.

"Yes, I'm Robert Craig," he answered, somewhat surprised.

The stout man seated himself with a sigh and began to sort through some papers on the table before him. The other four men continued to stare at Craig silently, until he began to feel uncomfortable and hostile. He stiffened his position of attention defiantly.

"You may relax, Mr. Craig," said the first man without looking up. "You aren't nervous, are you?"

"No," Craig said, trying to smile. "This is the first time I've been here and...." He let the sentence trail off, hoping for a sympathetic response. But he did not get it.

"Flight Officer, eh?" said the man. Then, looking up, he added, "Somewhat unusual to find a vigorous young man like yourself abandoning the space service for a Terran job, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

"Leaving something behind out there, Mr. Craig?"

"No, nothing," Craig snapped.

The other man glared at him a full minute. Craig met the stare and realized the considerable power behind the weak face.

"You don't like this sort of affair, do you, Mr. Craig?"

Craig was forced to look away. "I'm afraid I don't see the necessity," he answered in a controlled voice. "I served the Intergalactic Service well. My records prove that."

"Granted," said his questioner bluntly. "You are a Terran, are you not, Mr. Craig?"

"I should think that would be obvious," Craig said, matching the blunt tone.

The man rapped the table. "That's enough of your impertinence! You may very well have served the Intergalactic Service, but you are on Terra now. Terra, greatest, first of all civilized systems. Intergalactic may very well have to piddle with incompetent savages and wild colonists, but we of Terra assert our supremacy. Remember those words. You may not always find Terra so submissive to Intergalactic as Intergalactic would desire."

"Where are your loyalties, Mr. Craig?" demanded one of the other men suddenly.

"I am a Terran...."

"But your first loyalty is to Intergalactic. Is that right?"

"Is there a distinction?" Craig shot back, thoroughly angry.

"Do you wish to be held in contempt of this committee?" asked the first man, leaning forward half out of his chair.

"Of course not."

"Then you will confine your responses to simple yes and no answers, if you please, *Mr.* Craig."

Craig glared at the men in impotent rage. His head was beginning to ache. He had been many hours without paraoxylnebutal.

"Now, Mr. Craig," the first man began in an overly mild tone, "we shall begin again. Please try to restrain your show of emotion. You are here in petition of an identity card of provisional Code II type. You maintain that you have never been on Terra before. Indeed, you state that you have never had a political affiliation."

"Yes."

"What are your reactions to the latest acts of the Liberty party?" a third man abruptly asked.

"I have none," Craig answered, after an instant of confusion.

"You do not condemn the Liberty party?"

"I ... I...."

"Then you must favor it."

"I don't know anything about any...."

"Now, then, Mr. Craig," interrupted the head of the group. "The Import service report shows that you passed your tests aboard your ship. You were enabled to accomplish this through night study."

"Yes."

"Yet you maintain in your application that you had considered the space service a career."

"I changed my mind."

"Oh. You changed your mind. I see...."

"What do you do if they turn you down on your food ration?" Craig asked the man by his side on the bench. He had intended it as a vaguely humorous question.

"You don't eat."

"You mean they would actually let you starve?"

"If you could not eat, you would starve," the man said matter-of-factly.

"What's all this for, anyway? I mean the medical part."

"You are rationed fairly in accordance with your particular metabolism."

"You're kidding."

"One does not jest of such matters," said the man, getting up to take a seat on another bench.

"*But I'd like to keep it as a souvenir.*"

"*It is not permitted.*"

"*Look, it isn't issue. I bought the hide, had it made. I can pull off the marks of insignia and it's just another jacket....*"

"*That is not the point, Mr. Craig. Your clothing ration is defined by law. There are no exceptions.*"

"*These are your permanent quarters. You will occupy them immediately. Then, if you believe the location is wasteful of your time, you must petition the appropriate committee. This department cannot accept such a petition.*"

"*Your petition to be permitted to purchase a private means of conveyance is hereby denied.*"

The big man leaned far back in the battered desk chair. It creaked at worn joints, but touched the wall without sliding from under its enormous load. The man was silent through Craig's long, confused speech. By turns he examined his fingernails, picked at yellowed teeth, and stared above his head at the discolored ceiling.

"... but you can get all this from ISS, maybe even from Import, if they'll release my file," Craig argued.

"Uh-huh," the big man said between closed lips.

"I just made a mistake, that's all. You don't hear much about Terra out there. It was different in my father's day. It must have been different."

"Yeah."

"I haven't any character references on Terra, but I can post a good-sized bond if they'll release my ISS units."

The space-freight agent glanced up at Craig at the remark.

"Anyway, I can get my units anywhere ISS has a base," Craig continued. "I can handle anything up to 15 Gs acceleration without a new license. I can go heavier if I get a check ride."

The fat man leaned forward in the protesting chair. "You got everything, but you can't go. I can't hire you."

"Why not?"

"Look, kid—Craig, is it?—how long you been in?"

"Four days. I'm still working on my work clearances."

"Four days. You tried Intergalactic to see if they'd take you back?"

"Yes. Their hands are tied by my Terran contract."

"And ours aren't, eh?" The man rose from the desk and walked to a water tap. He popped a pill into his gaping mouth and drank from a tin cup. Then he returned to the inadequate chair. "So you're a spaceman. Flight officer—*ex*-flight officer. You know how to navigate through four star zones and the asteroid belt thrown in. You got a license for 15 Gs, could get five more. You got enough brains to pass Import's senior router's exam.

"Still, you ain't got enough sense to come in out of the rain!"

Craig sat upright in his chair.

"We get guys like you two, three a day. You're hot. You're big. You're rarin' to go. But you ain't goin' nowhere!"

Craig glared at the big man.

"I don't know how you got here, Craig. It ain't none of my business. Maybe you did quit honorable. Quit to follow your daddy's footsteps. Or maybe you went and burned up a colony somewhere!"

"That would be in my records, wouldn't it?" Craig challenged.

"It still don't make any difference. You're stuck here. Nobody leaves Terra without a permit. Nobody. You couldn't get a permit with a crowbar and a blaster. You got a problem, son. You asked for it. Maybe they told you beforehand, maybe they didn't. You got a problem of adjustment. Terra's moved a long, long way since your daddy left it. We're doing things here. We're going places. Big things and big places.

"You got to fit into that, kid. Fit in quick. Move with it. You don't like the red tape, the committees? I don't like 'em either. But I been here a while. I can cut red tape. Red tape is for guys like you, guys that don't know Terra, don't know where we're going.

"Stick around, kid. You still got sea legs. You're still hopped up on PON. You're going to like it here on Terra. You're going to like it great. You can make a quick dollar on Terra. You can spend a quick dollar here too. Smarten up or you'll finish scrubbing radioactive dust off girders!"

The girl approached his table, her hard eyes scanning him. Wordlessly she slid into the booth opposite him and made a sign for the bartender.

"Have a drink?" Craig suggested, smiling.

"Yeah."

"Work here?"

"What you mean by that?"

"I mean if you get a percentage on the drinks, I can...."

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